

Out-of-school learning: the uneven distribution of school provision and local authority support

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A significant volume of research demonstrates that out-of-school learning activities enhance student development in terms of cognitive, affective and social outcomes. However, there is also evidence that the opportunity to engage in these activities has been severely reduced in recent years. This paper explores the extent to which the provision of such opportunities is unevenly distributed—spatially and institutionally. The paper draws on research from two recently completed projects: one charting the distribution, attributes and vulnerability of local authority outdoor education centres across England and the other exploring variations in provision and participation in out-of-school learning within secondary schools throughout the UK. The paper highlights the uneven, precarious and uncertain nature of such activities and demonstrates that important regional and structural variations in the support and provision of opportunities for such activities by local authorities appear to have an important role in determining the provision of activities at the level of the schools.

Introduction

In November 2006 the UK Government launched the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2006) with the pledge that:

We believe that every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and personal development, whatever their age, ability or circumstances. (preface)

In a very unusual policy development the Manifesto invited supporters of out-of-school learning (OoSL) to pledge their commitment to this endeavour, ensuring: access for all; its benefits to young people's lives are promoted; high quality learning experiences; improved training; better management of risk; easy access to resources;

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and ways of engaging the wider community. This was followed by a £4.7 million investment to promote the aims of the Manifesto. In a clear attempt to improve the 'brand' image of OoSL the Government has effectively given a clear commitment to the integration of learning outside the classroom into school life. This has subsequently been followed by the development of web-based continued professional development resources for providers and the establishment of an independent Council for Learning Outside the Classroom. The newly-formed Council will have responsibility for further promoting the aims of the Manifesto and also overseeing the award of new Quality Badges for provider organisations, to give users clear assurances about a provider's management of risk and the quality of the learning experience they offer.

Clearly, these recent developments represent a significant step in promoting the benefits of out-of-classroom learning in England. Similar advances have already occurred in Scotland through the Government-sponsored Outdoor Connections development programme, designed also to promote OoSL and develop resources for providers and users. But such developments must also be seen in their wider context. For example, in England the promotion of OoSL can also be seen as a response to the aims of Every Child Matters (OFSTED, 2008a)—part of the 2004 Children Act—to ensure children are healthy, are safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. Furthermore, it is analogous to other government initiatives, such as the extended schools programme and recent developments in early years education. It is also timely given growing concerns about, on the one hand, children's experiences of the 'outdoors' (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997, National Children's Bureau, 2007) and, on the other hand, the inflexible and congested National Curriculum (White, 2004).

The benefits of OoSL have been well rehearsed (see Rickinson *et al.*, 2004), particularly in terms of their cognitive, affective and social outcomes. For example, studies have demonstrated the positive impact of educational fieldwork and visits on the long-term memory of children (Nundy, 2001), their self-esteem, well-being and sense of self (Kellert & Derr, 1998; Wells & Evans, 2003), creativity (Kirkby, 1989), their attention to learning, particularly for children with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Faber Taylor *et al.*, 2001) and the development of individual 'learner identities' (Muschamp *et al.*, 2009). A number of studies have also attempted to study the direct impact of out-of-classroom education on educational attainment (Howie, 1974; Lieberman & Hoody, 1998; Basile, 2000; Ratanpojnard, 2001). The majority of such studies tend to report positive outcomes on educational attainment, but there remain methodological concerns about the causal link being attributed to OoSL (Rickinson *et al.*, 2004; Faber Taylor & Kuo, 2006). However, despite the difficulty in making claims about the causal relationship between OoSL and education attainment, the most recent endorsement from OFSTED, the governmental agency responsible for the inspection of schools in England, appears unequivocal. Based on an evaluation of 27 educational establishments in a range of settings the research found that well planned and well implemented OoSL activities 'contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils' personal, social and emotional

development' (OFSTED, 2008a, p. 5). They argued that such activities make subjects more vivid and interesting to students and, hence, can enhance their understanding. The study also claimed that OoSL is an important mechanism in tackling educational underachievement. Given this support, the evaluation was still keen to identify variations in the provision and effectiveness of such educational activities, particularly by school sector and type of activity. For example, the study found that secondary schools were more likely to link day visits to their classroom activities than primary schools and that primary schools tended to rely more on external and/or commercial providers in defining and delivering the activities than secondary schools, particularly for residential visits. Conversely, primary schools made more effective use of their immediate school grounds and local areas, reflecting a greater flexibility in their timetables at Key Stages 1 and 2.

There are different terms for the provision of structured learning activities that are conducted outside the classroom. These kinds of activities are often referred to as 'out-of-classroom learning' (OoCL) and the DCSF and OFSTED currently use the term 'learning outside the classroom' (LOtC). However, both of these terms include activities that may be outside the classroom but within the school grounds. For the purposes of this project, we are focusing on those activities defined by Rickinson *et al.* (2004) as 'fieldwork and outdoor visits' and 'outdoor activities' rather than 'school grounds and community projects'. We have therefore used the term 'OoSL' throughout. However, what all these terms have in common is the clear connection between these activities and the school curriculum and that they are largely embedded within the existing school timetable. Therefore such activities are best characterised as formal learning, distinct from what Muschamp *et al.* (2009) refer to as 'out-of-school activities' (our emphasis), which also include computer clubs, football practice and language lessons, most of which occur after-school or during school breaks.

In order to keep this distinction the following discussion is primarily concerned with OoSL activities associated with specific curriculum subjects at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. The importance of OoSL and fieldwork is particularly evident in curriculum subjects whose naturalistic settings are largely found outside the confines of the school and its classrooms, such as geography and ecology (Foskett, 1999). Furthermore, 'residential visits can provide outstanding contexts for geography fieldwork' (OFSTED, 2008b, p. 40). Indeed, the UK National Curriculum for geography (Key Stages 1 to 3) requires pupils to undertake fieldwork outside the classroom as part of their learning (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2000, 2007). Similar criteria exist for GCSE and AS/A levels. Although statutory requirements exist, a recent review of geography in primary and secondary schools found that two-thirds of schools studied did not provide such fieldwork opportunities (OFSTED, 2008b). Consequently some of our analysis and discussion focuses on the provision of OoSL in the subject of geography. Although schools are more likely to organise OoSL activities in geography than for many other subjects (Power *et al.*, in press) the variation in provision between schools is actually rather telling and can, as we will see, be quite informative in helping understand the barriers to the provision and participation of OoSL activities more generally.

It has been shown elsewhere that great variation exists in the organisation and delivery of these kinds of learning activities between individual schools (and also between subjects) (Power, in press). And it is this uneven provision that provides the central focus for this paper. However, in this analysis we explore in more detail systemic variations in provision and find an important association with levels of support and resources provided by local authorities. As will be demonstrated, despite the renewed political commitment to OoSL, local authorities and schools are confronted by competing political and financial pressures that threaten their capacity to provide equitable opportunities for children and young people.

Methods

The findings presented in this paper are based on two separately funded studies by the authors during 2008. The first study was funded by the Real World Learning Campaign—a partnership between the Field Studies Council, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, National Trust, PGL, the Wildlife Trust and the Wildfowl and Wetland Trust. This involved a UK-wide survey of secondary schools, followed by a small number of more detailed case studies of schools to examine the provision of OoSL opportunities at the school level. It also explored levels of participation amongst the student populations and barriers to the provision of OoSL activities.

The survey involved a short two-page questionnaire, which was distributed to school headteachers. These were either completed by the headteacher, the school's nominated educational visits coordinator or some other member of staff with special interest or responsibility for OoSL within the school. There were three main groups of schools sampled:

- (1) state-maintained schools: 10% of schools randomly selected (or at least one school) in each local authority across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland;
- (2) special schools: 10% of schools randomly selected in each home nation of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland;
- (3) independent fee-paying schools: 10% of schools randomly selected in each home nation of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

In total 678 secondary schools were contacted, but only 222 completed and returned the survey instrument (33% of the original sample). Despite the relatively low response rate the responding schools were generally representative of the national population of schools (e.g. by school size and socio-economic composition). Twelve schools were selected for further consideration based on responses and analysis of the survey, representing varying levels of reported OoSL provision. This involved a semi-structured interview with the relevant member of staff.

Some findings from this study have already been reported (Power *et al.*, in press). This highlighted, for example, the wide variation in the type and number of OoSL opportunities that schools provide and identified systematic differences in provision by particular school characteristics. For example, small schools, schools in rural areas

and schools with large proportions of students eligible for free school meals tended to provide fewer OoSL opportunities. This demonstrates the importance of resources, accessibility and disadvantage in determining the kind of activities that have been identified by others to help develop important cognitive, affective and social outcomes.

This paper develops these issues further by considering the level of support and provision available to schools at the local authority level. We do this by drawing upon data from a second study, funded by the DCSF and undertaken in collaboration with CRG Research Limited. This DCSF study was primarily interested in assessing the capacity and viability of local authority outdoor education centres in England. This involved a telephone survey of all English local authorities, followed by more detailed case studies of seven outdoor education centres during 2008. Outdoor advisors or individuals with a responsibility for outdoor education provision were identified in 136 of the 150 local authorities in England. Such staff were able to provide an overview of responsibility for outdoor education centres within their respective local authority. They were also able to provide details on the changing levels of support, politically and financially, for outdoor education centres. However, detailed information on each outdoor education centre was mixed. Therefore a further 48 telephone interviews were conducted with centre managers in order to provide more specific details on provision, organisation, use and resourcing for such centres. Then a further seven centres were selected for site-visits and further discussions with centre staff about specific issues and challenges they faced and interviews with visiting groups where possible (CRG Research Limited, 2008).

These two sets of data, then, provide the basis for the following discussion. However, it is important to recognise the different geographies of the two data sets and how that affects our analysis. The data from 222 individual schools (postal survey and interviews) are from a UK-wide sample of schools, including maintained, special and independent schools. The data from local authorities (telephone survey and interviews) are only from England and are largely concerned with supporting OoSL in state-maintained schools. In much of the discussion the distinction is not important. However, where we present statistical analysis, combining data from schools with their respective local authorities it is important to note that we only use data from the 122 maintained schools in England in our original school sample.

Geography of local authority outdoor education facilities

Over two-thirds of local authorities reported having some form of outdoor education provision (66% of all English local authorities; 73% of those local authorities for which information was available). In total there were reported to be 235 English local authority outdoor education facilities.¹ Over two-thirds of such facilities were available for residential visits and just under half (44%) were located outside the local authority that was responsible for them. Indeed, 11% were located in Wales. The majority of local authorities with some provision had just one facility, but three local

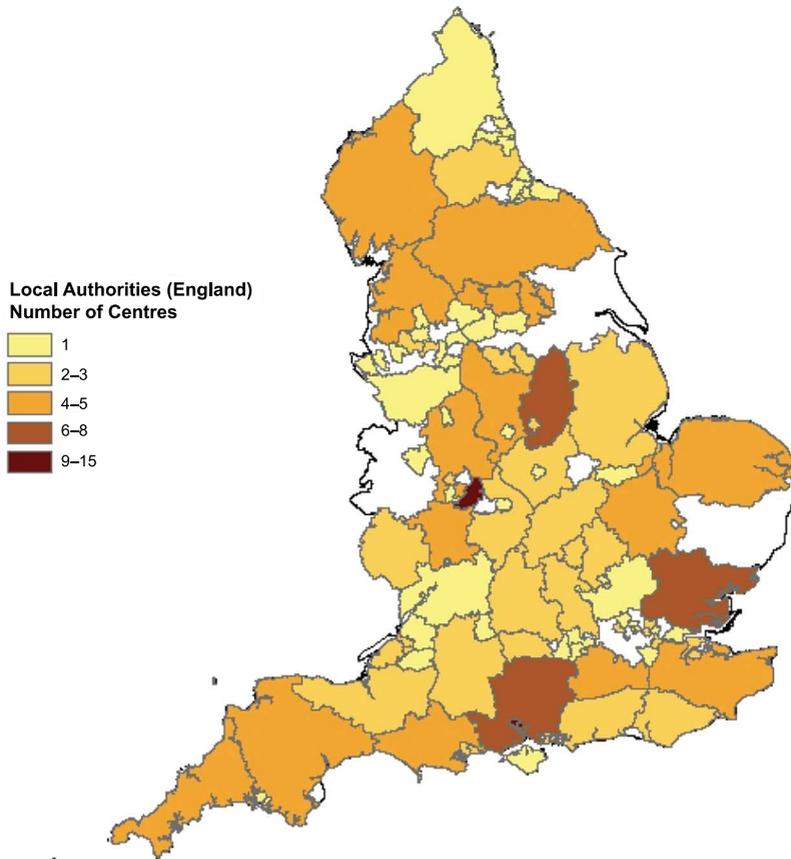


Figure 1. Provision of local authority outdoor education facilities

authorities had between 8 and 15 facilities each, reflecting very different levels of commitment and resources to outdoor education across England (Figure 1).

However, it is also important to consider the population size of each local authority in order to examine the relative variation in provision of outdoor education facilities. Using the number of school-aged children (for 2008) it is possible to standardise provision for further comparison. This begins to highlight the level of unequal access to outdoor education facilities across England. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of outdoor education facilities by the school-aged population size of each local authority. The resulting Lorenz curve highlights that approximately 50% of children in England have access to 80% of all local authority outdoor education facilities and that 10% of school-aged children have access to 30% of all local authority outdoor education facilities (Gini coefficient equal to 31.6). Furthermore, this inequality in provision has a particular geography that tends to reflect a north-south divide in the provision of outdoor education facilities in England (Figure 3).

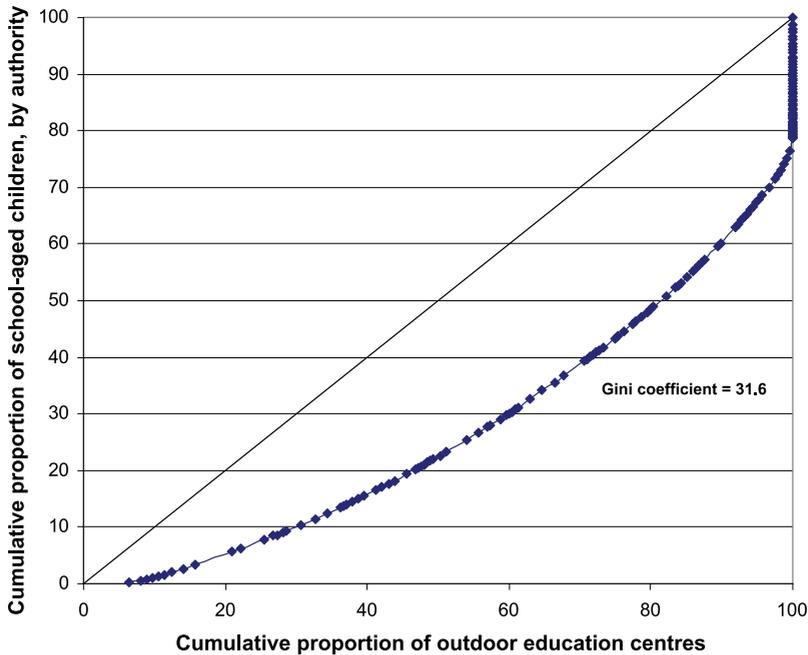


Figure 2. Unequal provision of local authority outdoor education facilities

Clearly local authority outdoor education facilities are not the only location or provider of OoSL activities for schools. But nevertheless they certainly provide an important and particular set of opportunities that are commonly linked to the curriculum (CRG Research Limited, 2008). Therefore, given the varying levels of provision of such facilities, what evidence is there that this helps determine the level of OoSL activities organised by individual schools and hence afforded to their pupils? It is this key question that the paper now begins to address.

Out-of-school learning activities

It has already been reported that there is 'wide variation in the extent to which schools provide OoSL activities at Key Stages 3 and 4' (Power *et al.*, in press). Overall, the vast majority of schools offer such activities across the eight main KS3 subjects² and report organising 11.5 activities on average per year for their students. Slightly fewer schools organise OoSL activities in the three core subjects of KS4³ and generally organise fewer activities; 4.2 on average per year for the students, although this may involve fewer subjects. It is also the case that, on average, schools tend to organise more extra-curricular activities per year than curricular-based OoSL activities.

In order to examine the relationship between the provision of outdoor education facilities and OoSL activities it is particularly useful to examine subjects that are more likely to be dependent on such provision. Therefore, in this paper we will also focus specifically on OoSL activities in geography.

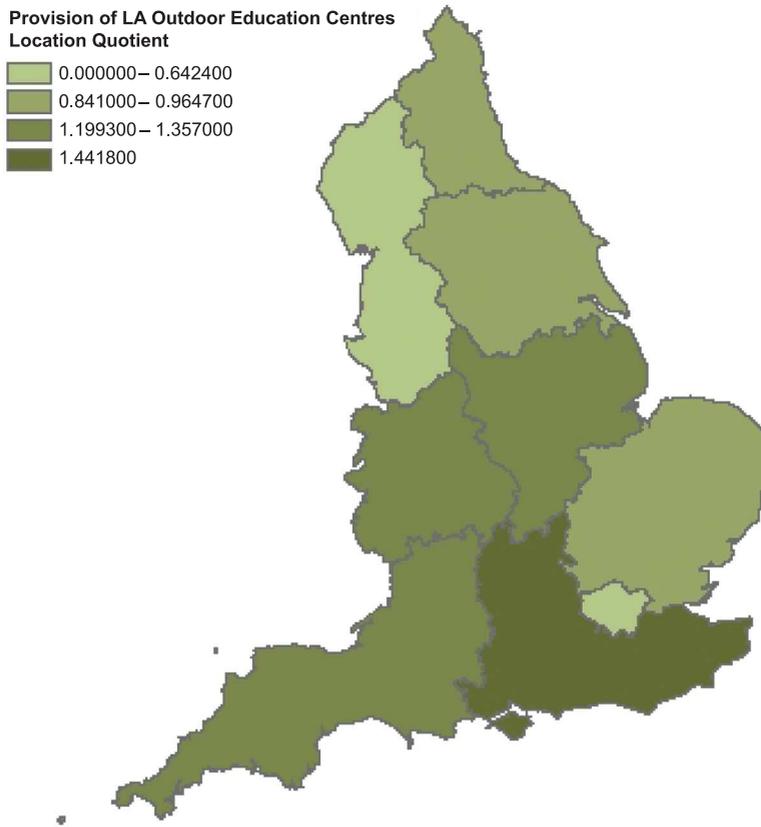


Figure 3. Regional variations in the provision of local authority outdoor education facilities

From the survey of 222 secondary schools⁴ across the UK, 145 reported providing OoSL activities in geography at Key Stage 3 (65% of all schools). Slightly more schools (159) reported providing OoSL activities in geography at Key Stage 4 (73% of all schools). However, the average number of geography activities that these schools reported organising at Key Stage 4 was slightly less than at Key Stage 3 (2.9 compared with 3.2 activities per year for their students). The fewer number of OoSL activities organised for geography at KS4 should be considered alongside the significant decline in the number of pupils studying geography at GCSE (OFSTED, 2008b). Although the 122 state-maintained schools in England were more likely to report providing OoSL opportunities in geography at both KS3 and KS4 (71 and 80%, respectively), they generally organised fewer activities at KS4 (2.5 per year), but comparable numbers of activities at KS3 (2.9 per year).

Of all the schools in the survey, the overwhelming majority of schools reported organising day trips for geography (65% at KS3 and 66% at KS4). Many fewer schools reported organising residential activities for geography, but the difference

here between KS3 and KS4 was much more stark—schools were twice as likely to report organising residential geography activities at KS4 than at KS3 (11% at KS3 and 22% at KS4). Again, this may reflect the smaller number of students studying geography at KS4 that, in turn, permits the opportunities to organise and fund residential activities.

In many schools the importance of fieldwork and OoSL in geography is evident, both in terms of the curriculum requirements and its educational benefits:

A lot of the visits now are linked purely to the curriculum and the syllabus and things like that. And if in some cases if there's a necessity to go, like geography field trips, er, they have to do it as part of their curriculum and obviously the benefits there are immense because they're picking up greater knowledge, you know field study work provides the basis for them to expand upon their answers in exams and in their coursework and stuff like that. So the benefits there are very great. (Chalkhill School)

In terms of curriculum areas, if we're going to do fieldwork and fieldwork is a component of your GCSE then all of you have to go.... Then obviously other things then like trips to the theatre, anything that takes place after school, overseas visits and stuff, well that's on the basis of 'do you want to go on this trip?'...There's no compulsion there but for curriculum things, especially geography it is compulsory. (Ysgol Llanmyn)

However, this enthusiasm does not always translate into more extensive residential fieldwork experiences:

- Q. Do you ever use any outdoor learning centres?
A. We as a geography department we don't do residential. If my memory serves me...I don't think there are that many residential. (Ysgol Llanmyn)
A. Geography...we get pupils on trips and some of it might be you know measuring foot fall in different parts of the town. You know what I mean they take them out on field trips with different focuses related to different parts of their coursework.
Q. And are they all local trips?
A. Yes they'd all be local in the town.
Q. There aren't many residential trips?
A. No. (Flintlock Academy)

Local authorities and out-of-school learning

From the survey of schools it is evident that the provision of curricular activities was associated with the perceived support of the respective local authority (Table 1). This was clearly evident in the proportion of schools that provided OoSL opportunities at KS3 and KS4 and the average number of activities they organised. The only exception to this was for the average number of OoSL activities organised for KS4 geography, where there was little difference between schools based on their perception of the local authority support they have received. Similar associations can be found based on the schools' awareness of an outdoor education advisor within their local authority (Table 2).

Occasionally, schools discussed the role of local authority in organising OoSL. In most cases this was in relation to the support they received from the local authority in

Table 1. Provision of OoSL activities and perceived support received from local authorities

Support received	KS3 Main subjects		KS3 geography		KS4 core subjects		KS4 geography	
	Percent of schools	Average number of activities	Percent of schools	Average number of activities	Percent of schools	Average number of activities	Percent of schools	Average number of activities
Poor or inadequate	76.9	7.8	46.2	2.2	69.2	4.0	53.9	2.9
Satisfactory	98.0	11.7	77.6	2.8	85.7	4.1	81.6	2.4
Very good	94.6	11.8	70.3	2.8	97.3	4.4	86.5	2.6

Table 2. Awareness of an outdoor education advisor in local authority

Outdoor education advisor	KS3 main subjects		KS3 geography		KS4 core subjects		KS4 geography	
	Percent of schools	Average number of activities	Percent of schools	Average number of activities	Percent of schools	Average number of activities	Percent of schools	Average number of activities
Yes	95.0	12.5	73.4	3.2	91.3	4.4	85.0	2.7
No	91.7	7.9	62.5	1.9	79.2	3.6	66.7	2.0

addressing health and safety requirements. But typically, this was often the extent to which schools received support from their local authority:

We do in terms of risk assessment and health and safety or whatever else, there's a document called HSP6 which is produced by the local authority which we must comply with if we are to do any trip, and it's basically just a document that covers the authority if anything goes wrong and it's a liability thing if anything goes wrong. In terms of any other contact with the local authority...I don't know. But definitely in compliance with risk assessment and health and safety there will be some contact. (Tunnock High School)

Q. Are the risk assessment forms designed in house then or are they from the local authority?

A. No they're from the local authority.

Q. Would you say LEA was helpful and supportive?

A. Yeah I mean I was on to health and safety about this health trip. Brilliant. I've no problem at all with them. The risk assessments are sent down...

Q. Separate to the EVC? [Educational Visits Coordinator]

A. Yup but he looks at it all and decides so ... and I'm not sure what the EVC does ... I do need to follow him up actually. (Rillmere School)

A few schools highlighted the benefits of further support and guidance they received from their local authority:

The local authority does have an outward bound co-ordinator, a guy who looks after the centres in Wales because the LEA actually is partly responsible for two centres...and he is actually very helpful, particularly on specific issues for us. And also if we're looking for a particular provision he's really helpful, but generally, erm, we do it ourselves. (Farhampton School)

Guidance, yes. There's a chap [in the local authority] that's in charge of all the educational visits and provides all the training or advice, so if there's anything we're not sure of we ring him, and they get a copy of all the residentials going on. (Kiley Grange School)

One school reported an occasion when a local authority advisor attended their residential activity, primarily to support a student with a disability. Some local authorities provide even more systematic support, such as funding at least one OoSL for every child per year and providing in-service training for school staff:

The local authority pays, they're allowed one trip a year. We pay for everything else. ...They've [the local authority staff] come here, they've done in-service for the staff, erm, very good. (Churchfield School)

Further relationships between the provision of OoSL activities by schools and the support of local authorities can be examined by looking at the provision of local authority outdoor education facilities. Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between the number of activities organised by schools at KS3 (main subjects) and KS4 (core subjects) and the number of outdoor education facilities available in their respective local authority. This suggests that although there is a positive relationship, particularly for the provision of KS3 OoSL activities, there is not a particularly strong relationship.

However, when we examine the relationships between the provision of outdoor education facilities and the number of OoSL activities in geography these positive

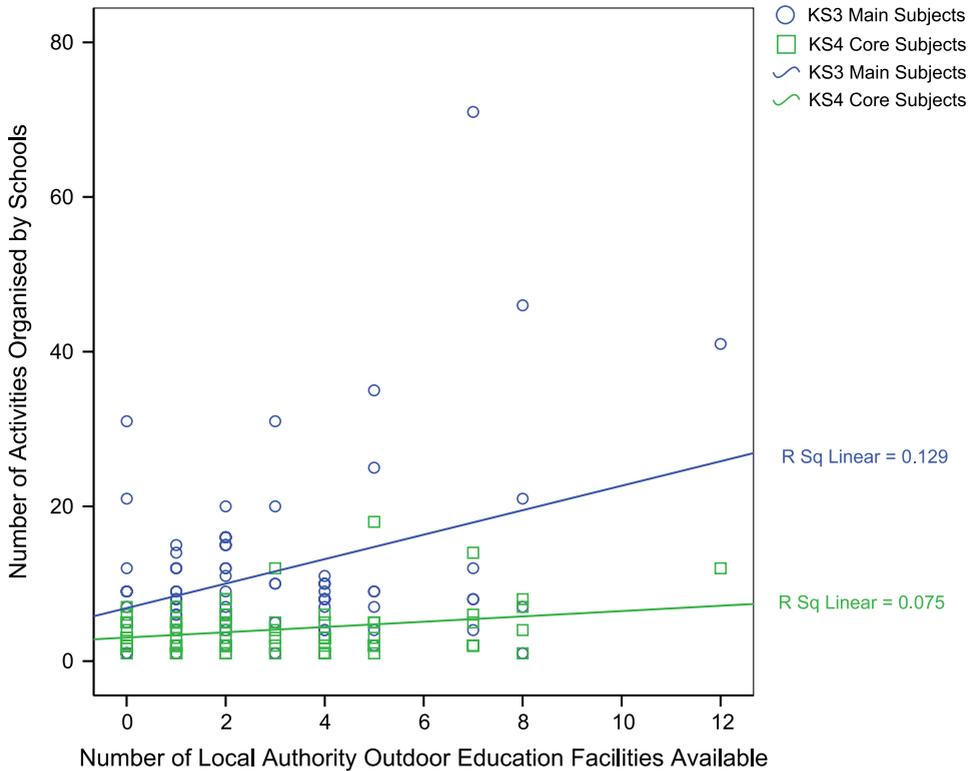


Figure 4. Relationship between OoSL activities (KS3 and KS4) and availability of outdoor education facilities

relationships are stronger (Figure 5). Again, this relationship is stronger in geography at Key Stage 3 and would be stronger if one of the outlying schools (a boys’ grammar school that organises 10 activities in KS3 geography) was removed from the analysis ($R^2 = 0.35$). One of the reasons why there may be a stronger relationship at KS3 is because of the greater numbers of students studying geography and the greater number of schools providing OoSL in geography at KS3. It may be the case, therefore, that due to the higher levels of demand there is a greater dependency on the local authority, both in its support and in its resources and facilities.

This analysis suggests, therefore, that just the presence and availability of local authority outdoor education facilities may determine a large amount of the variation in activities organised at the school level. However, the ‘unexplained’ variation probably also demonstrates the role of schools have in mediating opportunities for OoSL.

Barriers to out-of-school learning

It has already been identified that the support, resources and facilities for OoSL activities provided by local authorities may have some bearing upon the opportunities

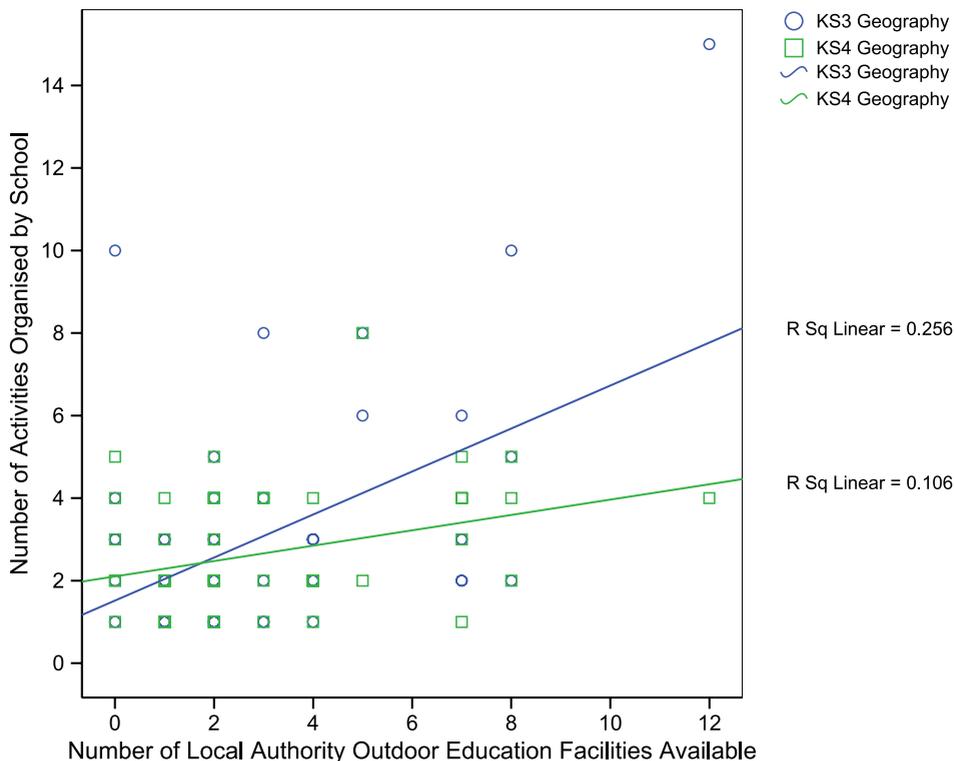


Figure 5. Relationship between geography OoSL activities (KS3 and KS4) and availability of outdoor education facilities

that a school can offer to its students. This in turn may help explain the wide variation in provision identified in this paper and elsewhere (Power *et al.*, in press).

Combining data from the school survey with data gathered from each local authority in England with regard to provision of outdoor education facilities, it is possible to consider the influence of other factors that may determine the provision of OoSL. Again, we will consider the provision of OoSL activities in geography. We will also just focus on KS3 geography since: (1) there are generally more activities provided at KS3, (2) this is regarded as the education phase in most need of change in geography (OFSTED, 2008b), and (3) we have already identified a greater association between the number of activities organised at KS3 and the number of facilities provided by the local authority.

Table 3 presents the results from linear regression of the dependent variable, the number of geography OoSL activities organised at KS3 reported by schools in England. This model can be used to account for 79% of the variation in the number of such activities organised by schools. As can be seen in Table 3, the number of outdoor education facilities available in their respective local authorities provides the greatest contribution in accounting for that variation in provision. This is followed by the smaller the proportion of white British pupils in the school the more activities

organised, which suggests schools with greater ethnic diversity are more likely to provide OoSL opportunities in geography at KS3. Many of the other factors that help account for variation in provision by schools are the reported attitudes towards a number of barriers to provision. So, for example, schools that tended to organise more activities were more likely to report that inadequate provision for facilities for OoSL, changes within syllabuses, limited supply cover for staff and advice from teacher unions against participation in such activities were major barriers to OoSL generally. Conversely, such schools were more likely to report that parental anxieties, lack of space in school timetables, risk assessment requirements and lack of support from both fellow teachers and senior management were *not* perceived to be barriers to OoSL.

Other factors that appear to influence the variation in provision of geography OoSL activities at KS3 are whether a school had a nominated educational visits coordinator and that the school was aware of an outdoor education advisor in their local authority. Surprisingly schools that reported *not* having a school policy for OoSL were more likely to report organising OoSL activities in KS3 geography.

Table 3. Linear regression results for dependent variable (number of geography OoSL activities organised at KS3)

	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficient	<i>t</i>
	B	Standard Error	Beta	
(Constant)	4.91	4.70		0.87
Number of outdoor education facilities	0.69	0.10	.67	7.15**
Proportion of pupils who are White British	-0.05	0.01	-.43	-4.31**
Barrier: Inadequate provision of facilities ¹	2.05	0.50	.38	4.09**
Barrier: Parental anxieties about risks ¹	-1.58	0.47	-.29	-3.38**
Barrier: Lack of space in timetable ¹	-1.31	0.40	-.37	3.28**
Barrier: Changes within syllabuses ¹	1.27	0.46	.29	2.74*
Barrier: Risk assessment requirements ¹	-0.86	0.33	-.24	-2.60*
Barrier: Limited support cover for staff ¹	0.86	0.39	.25	2.22*
Barrier: Teacher unions advising against participation in OoSL ¹	0.76	0.36	.20	2.13*
School policy for OoSL ²	-1.02	0.55	-.17	-1.84*
Barrier: Lack of support from other teachers ¹	-0.85	0.50	-.16	-1.71
Barrier: Lack of support from senior management ¹	-1.54	0.91	-.17	-1.69
School has an EVC ²	1.54	0.92	.17	1.67
Aware of OEA in local authority ²	0.77	0.59	.12	1.29
Proportion of pupils eligible for FSM	-0.24	0.35	-.07	-0.66

Note: $R^2 = 0.74$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .005$; ¹positive values suggest these are perceived to be a major barrier;

²positive values suggest a positive response to the item; EVC = educational visits coordinator; OEA = outdoor education advisor; FSM = free school meals.

Of course, such analysis must be considered with great caution. First of all there are issues relating to the accuracy of the data provided by schools—particularly in terms of estimating the number of OoSL activities organised (see Power *et al.*, in press). The regression analysis also highlights the difficulty of attributing causation to any of the factors considered. For example, it is not clear whether some of the reported barriers determine levels of provision or whether the levels of provision may determine the attitudes towards the barriers to further provision.

Given these concerns it is important to note that it is not our intention to predict or explain variations in OoSL provision in schools—this is a considerably more complex task than our data currently allow and is probably beyond the scope of possibility, due to its multi-layered and multi-faceted nature. However, it is our intention to consider the support and resources provided by local authorities in helping to determine the opportunities a school can offer in terms of OoSL. This regression analysis further supports the association made earlier between the number of local authority outdoor education facilities and OoSL activities in KS3 geography. Although the model presented in Table 3 does not account for the same levels of variation in the provision of OoSL activities in the main KS3 subjects ($R^2 = 0.34$), it is still the case that the number of local outdoor education facilities remains the single most important variable in the model in accounting for the variation in provision ($t = 3.75$).

It is possible that the number of outdoor education facilities available in each local authority reflects other local-authority level factors that may help determine provision of OoSL. This could include, for example, the size of the local authority and the economies of scale achieved in larger local authorities. Indeed, as Figure 6 illustrates there is a general trend between size of authority and availability of facilities. It could also be the case, as discussed earlier, that this reflects the general level of support and encouragement of OoSL in each local authority. Given these findings it is important, then, to examine in detail the organisation and future of local authority outdoor education facilities.

Future of local authority outdoor education facilities

It was widely reported by schools that the most dominant barrier to the provision of any OoSL activity was finance—81% of schools surveyed cited this as a barrier. Decisions by local authorities, such as one presented earlier to directly finance one OoSL visit per pupil per year, can clearly help address this barrier. Power *et al.* (in press) have also shown how some schools alleviate the financial costs through sponsorship and fund-raising. Nevertheless, the cost to schools and to families remains a major constraint on OoSL.

This has been exacerbated by reported increases in staff costs for local authority outdoor education facilities due to recent legislative changes; including the requirement for instructors to have full PGCE status and new contracts adhering to general local authority terms and conditions that mean that staff who work on weekends and evenings now require overtime payments. Local authorities and outdoor education

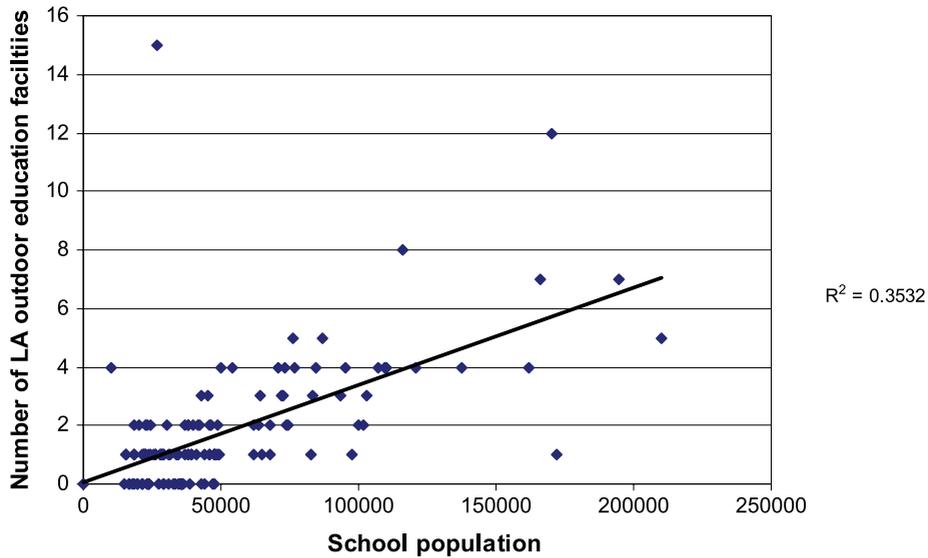


Figure 6. Availability of outdoor education facilities and size of local authority

centres also report that this has led to a decline in staff numbers, fewer specialist roles for staff and a significant shift towards the employment of sessional staff.

However, alongside increasing costs there has also been a decline in funding for outdoor education facilities in just over a third of local authorities surveyed (38%). Only 19% of local authorities reported rises (absolute and real) in funding of their facilities. As a consequence of rising costs and general budgetary constraints within local authorities there has been a shift in the way local authorities are financing and supporting their outdoor education facilities. The majority of local authorities said they continue to directly finance and subsidise their facilities (50% of those surveyed).⁵ However, an increasing number of local authorities are shifting towards a model of self-funding for their facilities. Consequently, such outdoor education facilities now have to pass on more of their costs directly to schools using their facilities. This has two further important knock-on effects because of: (1) encouraging greater users (and centre managers suggest that diversification is often at the expense of curriculum content/specialism and school bookings); and because (2) there is a growing tendency for schools to only use such facilities for three days (rather than a full week) which makes 'filling' places even harder to achieve.

Many local authorities and facility managers suggested that models of self-financing would become more prevalent over time. This looks particularly likely given that just under half of local authorities surveyed said that they would be decreasing their funding of their outdoor education facilities in the next few years. Case studies of such self-financing facilities (CRG Research Limited, 2008) suggest that this can be a viable option and that it can give centres the opportunity to secure funding for re-investment and much-needed capital development. However, only a third of local

authorities said that the future of their facilities was secure. This uncertainty is further highlighted by the number of local authorities (35%) that said they thought their centres were vulnerable.

The apparently uncertain future of local authority outdoor education facilities is clearly counter to the rhetoric of the Government's Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto. It is also worrying given the evidence presented in this paper purporting to show the relationship between the provision of OoSL activities, particularly in subjects such as geography, and the availability of outdoor education facilities and general local authority support towards OoSL. It must also be a concern that local authorities adopting the self-financing model of provision tend to have lower levels of provision (36,549 school-aged children per facility in local authorities with self-financing compared with 22,765 school-aged children per facility in local authorities with subsidised facilities).

Conclusion

Despite the major promotion of OoSL and outdoor education in the UK, the provision of and participation in such activities remains precarious and uncertain. This analysis of schools and local authorities further highlights the complex nature of this provision, suggesting that the successful implementation of the aims and ambitions of the Government's Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto is heavily dependent on a wide range of factors. It is also largely the enthusiasm and motivation of a small number of individuals working in schools, local authorities and outdoor education facilities that have maintained current levels of OoSL. However, despite this complexity, important regional and structural variations in provision appear to also exist, both in terms of participation of different groups of children (Power *et al.*, in press) and in terms of the provision of OoSL opportunities. Using the subject of geography as an example, our analysis found an important link between the reported number of activities organised by schools and the availability of local authority outdoor education facilities. This would suggest that access to outdoor education facilities appears to have an important role in determining the provision of OoSL activities in schools, particularly in field-based subjects such as geography. Clearly, this association may be unique to geography, particularly because of the importance and tradition of field-based learning in UK geography. But it is also the case that many of the facilitators and barriers to OoSL in geography identified in this analysis are generic to all OoSL.

There are two trends, then, that should be of concern to policy-makers in central and local government. The first is that the uncertain future of local authority outdoor education facilities may threaten the opportunities for OoSL afforded to schools and children, whether this is through a process of rationalisation facilities or increasing the costs directly to schools. Faced with even greater costs it is likely that the number of OoSL activities organised by schools is likely to decline rather than increase. This is further exacerbated by the government's reluctance to make OoSL mandatory, despite the overtures towards OoSL in the Manifesto and in individual subject curricula.

The second worrying trend is that the shift towards a market-drive model of funding for local authority outdoor education facilities could threaten the quality and educational objectives of the activities undertaken there. It has been well argued that the organisation, content and delivery are central to the educational value of OoS (Rickinson *et al.*, 2004, OFSTED, 2008a). However, many local authorities and facility managers consider diversification to be the most likely route to achieving sustainability for their facilities. There is a great danger that diversifying the function of the traditional local authority outdoor education facility may be at the expense of more tailored provision offering well planned, curricula-focused and classroom-linked activities.

Notes

1. The significance of local authority provided facilities can be demonstrated by comparing the number of such state-supported facilities with private or third sector provision—the two largest alternative providers are the education charity, the Field Studies Council and PGL, the largest commercial provider, with 17 and 8 centres across the UK, respectively.
2. These subjects at Key Stage 3 include: science (all science subjects combined), mathematics, English, modern languages, history, geography, art and RE.
3. These core subjects at Key Stage 4 include: science (all science subjects combined), mathematics and English.
4. Including state-maintained schools, special schools and independent schools.
5. It should also be noted that just under a third (32%) of local authorities were unsure how their facilities were financed or what model of resourcing they were using.

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